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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CAIRO 002536

SIPDIS

NSC STAFF FOR ABRAMS/POUNDS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: WHAT IF YOU HELD A COMPETITIVE PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTION AND NOBODY SHOWED UP?

REF: A. CAIRO 2516 (NOTAL)

[1](#)B. CAIRO 2506

[1](#)C. CAIRO 2254

[1](#)D. CAIRO 1926

[1](#)E. CAIRO 1509

Classified by Charge Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary and Introduction

[1](#)1. (C) President Mubarak's late February proposal to amend Article 76 of the Egyptian constitution will, once parliament has hammered out the modalities, allow for direct, competitive presidential elections for the first time in the country's history. Although no announcement has yet been made, recent statements make it increasingly clear that Mubarak will stand for a fifth term this fall. So far, the President's declared opponents include a prominent (but domestically controversial) dissident now on an academic fellowship in Washington, an erratic former MP currently in Europe (some say for good), and a feminist academic with an unreconstructed Marxist ideology. It is unlikely that any of these three will meet the criteria, once they are established, for legal candidacy. Ayman Nour, the only declared opponent with a political party organization, a seat in parliament, and something of a public constituency, would appear to pose the most serious potential challenge to Mubarak, but he is scheduled to go on trial for forgery (in a case he alleges is fabricated by the GOE) in late June. Of the other opposition parties represented in parliament, none currently shows any sign of putting forward a candidate, with one party leader tipped as a potential candidate asserting that he "refuses to be an extra in a bad movie."

[1](#)2. (C) Though Mubarak's constitutional move initially received a warm welcome, skepticism is growing about the modalities, particularly the formula (yet to be established) through which candidates will be legally qualified to run. In sum, prospects appear dim this year for a presidential election in which multiple and credible candidates compete with the incumbent on a level playing field. On the other hand, Mubarak's proposal is a concession of the principle that a competitive electoral process, rather than either a rubber-stamp referendum or a military pedigree, is what confers real legitimacy on a head of state. Thus, respected observers also believe that this amendment will effectively end the lock the Egyptian military has held on the presidency since 1952. Mubarak's move may well set the stage for a more seriously contested race in the next election (barring regressive developments in the meantime), and it likely opens the door to further constitutional amendments that could have major ramifications for Egypt's system of government. End summary and introduction.

The Incumbent Emerging...

[1](#)3. (C) President Mubarak has yet to announce his intentions regarding this fall's presidential elections. The elections, after the constitutional amendment proposed by Mubarak in late February (ref E), will be the first competitive, direct presidential election in Egypt's history. Although the President is remaining mum on the subject, most observers fully expect him to stand for a fifth presidential term. This conviction was buttressed by a March 23 press conference held by ruling NDP official, presidential son, and presumed aspiring successor, Gamal Mubarak. In the conference, Gamal stated clearly that he would not be a presidential candidate this fall and described opposition rhetoric about "inheritance of rule" as groundless.

[1](#)4. (C) Though both Gamal and his father have long sought to downplay public speculation about the first son's presidential aspirations, they have also generally avoided statements which explicitly rule out certain scenarios. In this context, we interpret Gamal's March 23 statement as the clearest indicator to date that any plan he may have to succeed his father will not be initiated before this fall's elections. In the March 23 conference, Gamal was also

careful to note that his father "had not made any decision" on his own potential candidacy this fall, though we doubt Gamal would rule out his own candidacy at this time if there was any possibility that his father would not run. Moreover, ruling NDP Secretary-General Safwat Sherif told the Egyptian media on March 30 that President Mubarak was the party's choice to run this fall, though a final announcement on the President's own decision would not be made before May. Again, it is very unlikely Sherif would make such a statement without a green light from Mubarak, who in turn would probably not be taking this tack if he was preparing the ground for someone else to run.

Did They Get the Memo?

15. (C) While the NDP elites have been artfully improvising their public posture on the presidential election question, the ruling party worker-bees have also been active, although they appear to be drawing from the referendum-era playbook: In the past three weeks, banners have sprung up across Cairo neighborhoods and heavily trafficked intersections proclaiming in large print and vivid colors "Yes to Mubarak, yes, yes, yes!" Although, in Egyptian politics, any time is a good time for sycophantic expressions of support for the President, and the election year is underway, the appearance of these banners might have more to do with the recent increased activity of the umbrella protest group Kifaya ("enough") (ref A), which has adopted "No to Mubarak; No to another term," as one of its principal slogans. On the other hand, one zealous NDP supporter recently launched a pro-Mubarak website "Mish Kifaya/'Not Enough'" calling on the President to serve another term.

And In This Corner...

16. (C) With one possible exception, none of those who have so far thrown their hats into the ring as opponents would pose a credible electoral challenge to Mubarak. The prominent civil society activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim (SEI), though widely admired abroad, has long been targeted by reactionaries in the Egyptian media and smeared, with considerable success, as a greedy and craven "foreign agent." SEI, not long after announcing his candidacy, made plans to spend the spring semester on an academic fellowship in Washington. Another personality who announced his candidacy in late 2004 is Mohammed Farid Hassanein, an erratic former MP who has made several abrupt turns in his political ideology, most recently casting his lot with the liberal reformers and joining the board of SEI's Ibn Khaldoun Center. Hassanein, who once exhorted crowds to burn down the U.S. Embassy during an anti-Iraq war demonstration, has been in Europe for several months, and according to one of his associates, "is not coming back." A third declared candidate, the celebrated feminist author Nawal es-Saadawi, has long been reviled in the mainstream Egyptian media as a cultural iconoclast and zealous atheist. Her political views are generally old-school Marxist. (Note: In the absence of political party affiliation, it is highly unlikely that any of these three will qualify for legal candidacy, once the criteria are established. End note.)

17. (C) The one Egyptian politician who has both declared his intent to run and could conceivably pose at least a partial electoral threat to Mubarak is Ayman Nour. Nour, 40, has been an MP for 10 years and leads the generally progressive and liberal Ghad Party, legally licensed in the fall of 2004. A fierce critic of the Mubarak regime and a strong proponent of sweeping political reform, Nour is as ambitious and aggressive as any politician in Egypt and has demonstrated strong media skills and sharp political instincts. Nour and his supporters believe it is for these reasons that he became the target of a criminal forgery investigation and was jailed for six weeks. Nour, with five codefendants he alleges framed him on behalf of the government, is scheduled to stand trial beginning June 28. This trial, which could last for months, will likely deprive Nour and his party of much of the time and energy they would need to make a significant electoral showing this fall. With characteristic bravado, Nour has vowed to "put the government on trial with me," and predicted to us that the trial would increase his public support.

18. (C) Comment: It is currently very difficult to quantify Nour's public support. An (unscientific) Cairo University survey last summer found that Nour was Egypt's "most popular MP," a finding which reportedly got the poll's organizer into trouble with his superiors and infuriated parliament speaker Fathy Surour. In discussions with us, Nour appears to believe that he has tangible popularity on the Egyptian street, though this may be based on his appearances in his own constituency of Bab Sharyea, a lower middle class neighborhood in central Cairo. Our own sense is that public support in for Nour is neither particularly broad nor deep,

though his name recognition has increased sharply since his arrest and he does not appear to have been seriously tainted, so far, by media insinuations that he is a puppet of outsiders. (See refs B, C, and D for more on the Nour case.) End comment.

19. (C) Conspicuously absent from the presidential fray to date have been the leaders of the Egypt's other political parties. Neither the nationalist/liberal Wafd, the leftist Tagammu', nor the Nasserists, whom, with the Ghad, are the only opposition parties represented in parliament, have yet shown any indication that they intend to compete in the presidential race, although each has long included competitive presidential elections on its list of demands. Interestingly, President Mubarak told CODEL Pelosi in late March that he was "begging" for someone to run. Embassy contacts have told us that the GOE is putting pressure on Rif'at Said, head of the leftist Tagammu' party, to run, though Said has repeatedly denied interest in running and recently told a European diplomat he would "refuse to be an extra in a bad movie."

Devil in the Details

10. (C) A key to the competitiveness of this fall's presidential elections will be the criteria eventually set for prospective candidates to qualify to run. There appears, so far, to be no consensus on a formula for qualification - the parliament is apparently concentrating on a system modeled on France, in which candidates must secure a percentage of endorsements from elected officials at the local, provincial, and national levels. It is also widely anticipated that, for this year only, a "grandfather clause" will operate in which each party represented in parliament may nominate a presidential candidate, without an endorsement process. (Note: As discussed above, of the four opposition parties represented in parliament, only one, Ayman Nour's Ghad Party, has so far indicated an intent to compete. It is likely that whatever criteria are finally established will exclude independents, particularly from the Islamist trend, from competition. Parliament is expected to finalize the modalities for the amendment in May. The proposal will then be put to a public referendum, some time this summer, and will thereafter be ratified as law. End note.)

11. (C) Though Mubarak's reform proposal was initially greeted warmly by a broad spectrum of political forces, elation has in the past month given way to skepticism, as many observers, particularly in the opposition press, predict that the bar will be set too high for candidates to qualify. One proposal currently being considered by parliament would require candidates to secure endorsements from 20 percent of elected officials at local, provincial, and national levels. For an opposition candidate, this would translate into securing literally thousands of endorsements from a pool of elected officials almost uniformly affiliated with the NDP.

A Democratic Legacy (?)

12. (C) Despite all of the justified skepticism and caveats, there is no doubt that Mubarak's February proposed amendment constitutes a potential landmark in modern Egypt's political history. (See ref D for an overview and analysis of recent political reform steps in Egypt.) Though Mubarak, and before him Sadat and Nasser, long contended that the occasional referendums, which always yielded 90-plus percent votes in favor of reelection, conferred real legitimacy on the head of state, the President, in calling for direct, competitive elections has now conceded this point. Other observers believe the most significant outcome of the amendment will be to sharply reduce, if not eliminate, the military factor in presidential selection. By establishing direct elections, the military, which has supplied each of Egypt's three republican presidents, will no longer confer legitimacy. Moreover, uniformed military personnel can neither run for office, nor even vote (unless they resign), and will necessarily play a less influential political role in the face of direct elections.

13. (C) Beyond conceding the principle of direct, competitive elections, Mubarak's proposed amendment also shatters the taboo of constitutional reform, another opposition demand previously rejected by the ruling party. With the precedent of amending one article set, proponents of amending other articles will probably gain significant momentum. If constitutional reform proponents have their way, presidential powers could be curtailed and term limits imposed. Finally, even though as of late March there seems little prospect for a serious presidential competition this year, the amendment, barring regressive steps in the coming years, may well set the stage for a more robustly contested race the next time around. Should this scenario come to pass, Mubarak appears to be betting, history may remember him as a leader who ruled

as an autocrat but left a democratic legacy.

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